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The Imperative of the School Choice Option of NCLB: In Whose Interest?

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Abstract

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law, educators have faced challenges trying to protect the common good of a public education while, at the same time, developing and/or reviewing proposals to provide for the school choice option of NCLB. In the debate over market-driven education versus traditional public education, many times, the ideologies behind each approach come into direct conflict. Educators and legislators need to be able to identify when privileged interests are at the core of reforms or if the education of each student is the primary interest being served.

This project provides a real life portrait of the performance of a charter school and a traditional school situated in the sprawling metro Atlanta area. Additionally, the denial of two charter petitions was evaluated. The denials revealed educators who could recognize charter petitions that, as a result of class privilege, might compromise the educational choice of less privileged students. Furthermore, the review of these denials could inform educators of the red flags that might arise from conflicting interests. The study indicates that only by placing students first in the debate between charter schools versus traditional public schools can there be assurance that public educational goals are equitably met among the two.

The Imperative of the School Choice Option of NCLB: In Whose Interest?

Along with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) came sweeping reforms in education. School choice was one of the reforms articulated into law by NCLB. Although school choice seems like a new idea, since the early decades of the 20th century, reformers have pressed for corporate models of governance and new organizational techniques for public schools (Cuban, 1990, p. 6).

School choice sounds like a good alternative to parents who are frustrated with the bureaucracies of public schools and would like more educational options for their children. Since NCLB was signed into law, charter schools have taken on several different forms. Conversion charters, start-up charters, cluster charters, and domed charters are among these options. A conversion charter is when a school that is already within the district is converted to a charter school. Start-up charters are much more difficult since there are no federal funds allocated for their building projects (Center for Education Reform, 2012). On the other hand, a cluster charter is when more than one school within a district is targeted as a conversion or start-up charter. Finally, a domed charter seeks to become an autonomous district within an already established district. Hassard (2013) used this term when referring to a conversion charter proposed by residents of an upscale southern community. According to Hassard (2013), this conversion “[would] have autonomy from the county board of education, and [would] have complete and comprehensive power to work out its own business plan, establish curriculum, and hire teachers that meet its own criteria” (para. 3). A distinction is made because these types of charters, while accepting local and federal funding, seek an even greater degree of autonomy and resemble a domed off district.

Literature Review

The case study of two schools, one a charter and one a traditional public school, offers a portrait of the challenges and improvements ushered in by NCLB. A detailed case study of a charter versus a non-charter school, in the years immediately following the enactment of NCLB, demonstrates how NCLB legislation operates in practice. As John Dewey has insisted, “the ultimate test of a theory is the difference the theory makes in practice” (as cited in Newman, 2006, p. 244). Hence, since the theoretical framework of NCLB is aimed at improving education and choice for students, exploring how the intentions of NCLB hold up should be a telling indicator of its success.

In practice, mandates made under NCLB carry with them rewards and penalties, which are attached to federal money. A school is allocated federal funds based on enrollments. This means that a traditional public school loses some of its federal funding if a student within its district transfers to a charter. Thus, the money follows the child to the charter school. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are public schools and cannot charge tuition; however, they differ from public schools in that they are relieved from important state or local rules (Spring, 2012). This exemption from state and local rules is aimed at promoting creative teaching, innovative pedagogical practices, and a greater degree of autonomy for the school (Spring, 2012). Additionally, charter schools must comply with all civil rights legislation (Spring, 2012), and according to the state’s Charter Schools Commission (State Charter Schools Commission, 2014), must offer open enrollment to students of failing schools within the district. If open enrollment and having the chance to leave a failing schools sounds like the miracle that parents have been waiting for, their hopes may be stalled when space limitations are taken into account,

because although charter schools must offer open enrollment, enrollment is limited based on the number of available seats. Consequently, as the number of seats approaches capacity, the school then holds a lottery among applicants to fill the remaining seats (Georgia Department of Education, 2014c). Unfortunately, the nature of lotteries forces some children to remain in schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). Herein lies a key difference between charter and non-charter schools; traditional public schools are obligated to accommodate all children, even if all seats are full.

Since NCLB was signed into law, the growing pains within U.S. public schools have caused a great deal of controversy. One school district that is keenly aware of its growing pains is the David County School District and particularly, David High School. David High School serves a growing and diverse population. Post NCLB David High School has consistently performed higher on required state tests than state averages; yet, concerned citizen groups have proposed cluster charters, domed charters, and conversion charters.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first goal is to measure educational outcomes between a charter and non-charter public school that are very close together; however, they are not within the same district. The second goal of the study is to consider the denial of charter petitions, which could help future petitioners, as well as educators understand what is and what is not the goal of implementing a charter school.

Methods

This study uses mixed methods. Quantitative data was used to compare across several categories between the two schools. Comparisons of student achievement were

made using the Georgia Department of Education's school report card, while racial composition and economic data were gathered from US Census Bureau data. The Public School Review website provides publicly available information on minority enrollments, number of students served, and student growth. The information from the Public School Review website was verified against the National Center for Education Statistics website to ensure accuracy.

Regarding the review of denied charter petitions, qualitative data was collected using relevant interviews with major news outlets along with public records. As well, both sides of the argument were evaluated qualitatively through the literature of Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn.

Results

Student Demographics, Student-Teacher Ratios, and School Growth

David High School and Cantrell City High School are 1.9 miles apart. The two schools are not within the same district. However, since David County School District does not have a High School Charter within its district, the closest one, in proximity, was chosen to see how much of a difference two miles could make. Cantrell City High School is a Title 1 charter (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a) in the southeastern city of Cantrell, while David High School is a suburban David County school.

Cantrell City High School is a charter that is part of the Cantrell City School District (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a). David High School, on the other hand, is a traditional brick and mortar public school. David High School serves more than twice the number of students, at 1809, than Cantrell City High, at 824 (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b). Since enrollments were so very different at these two schools,

growth in student population was another consideration, and revealed that while Cantrell City High had some growth, 8% over a five-year period, David High had grown by 21% over the same period (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b). Consequently, teacher/student ratios were taken into account and it was found that David High had a student teacher ratio, which was higher than both the charter and the state average (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b). David High addressed the impact of this growth by increasing their teaching staff by 34% during the period evaluated (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b).

Background: Racial Composition and Economics

Additionally, minority enrollments at David High School were 35% higher than Cantrell City High. David High's minority enrollments were 82% while the nearby charter school had a minority enrollment lower than the state average (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b). Furthermore, minority enrollments at these two schools seem to reflect the demographics of their respective communities. Cantrell City has a majority white population, at 73.5%, while David County has a majority black population, at 54.8% (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Because of the diverse populations, economics were also considered because the wealth of any school is determined in large part by the community's tax base. Ironically, while David High School appears to meet the criteria for Title 1 funds with 42% of its students participating in the free lunch program (Public School Review, 2014b), it is not a Title 1 school (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b). Conversely, Cantrell City High School, while only having 22% of its students on free lunch (Public School Review, 2014a), is a recipient of Title 1 funds (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a).

When considered along with housing costs and average incomes, the city of Cantrell clearly has advantages. Households in Cantrell earn, on average, \$20,768 more annually than residents of David County (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Residents of Cantrell also have more homeowners and pay less rent than David County residents. In fact, residents of David County pay almost double the rent for 1 and 2 bedroom apartments than their neighbors in the city of Cantrell (Public School Review, 2014a, 2014b). These demographics are worth considering when comparing these two schools because in a rapidly growing community, with inflated housing prices and lower incomes, lack of Title 1 funding presents even more challenges for students and educators.

Academic Comparison

When comparing the two schools, it appears at first glance that Cantrell City High School has done better across the board; however, it is worth considering how much better they have done. While Cantrell City High School scored higher than David High School in English Language Arts in 2009/2010, David High School made scores mostly in the high 80s and low 90s and passed NCLB criteria (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a, 2014b). It should be noted, however, that Cantrell City High School did not have any Hispanic or English Language Learners (ELLs) in this testing period. Also, as evidenced by the mathematics scores, David High School did not meet AYP in 2009/2010; however, the following year their math scores improved considerably placing them back in the category of meeting AYP (Georgia Department of Education, 2014b). Additionally, in the 2010/2011 school year, black students and low SES students surpassed students of the same demographic, in math, who attended the charter school

(Georgia Department of Education, 2014a, 2014b). While both schools met AYP in 2010/2011, it should be noted that David High School faced the challenge of serving ELLs while at the same time producing high enough scores between two demographic populations to exceed the scores of the charter school (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a, 2014b).

Graduation Rates

The second indicator that the Georgia Department of Education uses to determine the effectiveness of a school is its drop out rates. In the 2010/2011 school year, Cantrell City High School had a lower percentage of students graduating in each area evaluated. The charter school's overall graduation rate was 1.9% lower than the public school, graduation rates among black students was 4.2% lower, and low SES children graduated at a rate of 2.6% lower than David High school (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a, 2014b).

Denied Charter Petitions

David High School was an interesting school to observe as a model of public schools. For several years, the David County School District faced an onslaught of corruption. In February 2013, the Governor ousted two-thirds of the David County School Board. This followed a report by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which described the board as being “engaged in open warfare with itself, [engaging in] questionable staff hiring practices, and [claiming the school had demonstrated] fiscal irresponsibility” (Severson, 2013, para. 5). Additionally, in December 2013, a former Superintendent was convicted of several counts of racketeering (Milligan, 2013, para. 1).

While court proceedings were still in progress in the David County School District, a group of concerned stakeholders drafted a cluster charter petition. Their proposal included seven schools to be housed within the existing public schools in the district. The Charter School Association's Executive Vice President, Andrew Lewis expressed why he thought the initial vote for a cluster charter was successful ("Druid Hills voters," 2013). Lewis said that the charter petition expressed the district residents' desire for a greater say in how their children learn and how their schools are run. Furthermore, Lewis said that the cluster charter was an attempt to "move from a management and control governance model by the local board of Education, to an oversight governance model" ("Druid Hills voters," 2013, para. 7), articulating the sentiments of the proponents of school choice. Regardless of the problems within the administration, however, David High School was doing very well academically.

Citizens responded with well thought out concerns to the proposal for the cluster charter and echoed the arguments of the skeptics of school choice. Hassard (2013), a writer, former high school science teacher, and Professor Emeritus of Science Education at Georgia State University, claimed that only 82 of the 482 David County School employees in the cluster responded to a survey about the proposal. The charter included a secondary effort to dome off a sister community as a separate and freestanding school district. Hassard (2013) contended that the move was undemocratic because it did not represent "a broad cross-section" of the constituency in the district (para. 21). Hassard (2013) went on to suggest that the petitions were yet another attempt by "school choice advocates to privatize public education" (para. 23).

Conversely, Mark Elgart, president and Chief Executive of AdvancED, responded to the controversies within the David County School district. According to Elgart, the corruption in the David County Schools was the result of “a tenured system in stagnation” (as cited in Severson, 2013, para. 9). Elgart also commented on the petition for a domed charter in the sister community, stating in an interview with the New York Times that “there [had] been racial divisions between the county’s north and south for years, and that the issue [was] less about race than socioeconomic differences, the result of a shrinking middle class, and a growing disparity between wealthier property owners and the poor” (as cited in Severson, 2013, para. 15). Elgart recognized that the prestigious community’s charter efforts were more about prioritizing property owners and real-estate values than students. Likewise, it is imperative for new teachers to understand the implications of a “reformed educational system advocated by privileged interests” (Stewart, 2012, p. 5). Furthermore, although Elgart and Hassard represent opposing opinions regarding school choice, each recognized the community’s attempt to segregate their neighborhoods from the rest of the district. They, along with other educators, were able to see beyond the standard rhetoric of school choice and serve the students first by opposing the upscale community’s domed Charter.

Ultimately, the school board denied the David County Cluster Charter Petition, giving four reasons, which included, “financial impact, duplication of programs, lack of innovation, and lack of uniqueness” (Johnson, 2014, p. 2). The effort seemed more of an attempt to overthrow the corrupt school board than to improve students’ academic achievement. Additionally, school choice options are typically meant to serve children whose district school has been deemed a failing school (Finn & Hess, 2004, p. 12) or to

give choices to students in unsafe schools (Aske, 2013, p.110), and neither of these problems existed at David High School.

Results

In practice, NCLB may have helped to close the achievement gap in math between the two schools. Both schools are relatively high achieving schools; however, the charter school was not as successful at keeping young people in school and also lacked the diversity of the traditional public school.

Discussion

The controversy over school choice, measured against actual outcomes, has caused some school reformers to change their minds regarding the issue. One very influential educator, Diane Ravitch, who served as Assistant Secretary of Education under George H. W. Bush, has advocated for school choice and privatization. She has had a strong influence on what has and has not been articulated in NCLB. In retrospect, however, Ravitch now claims that privatization is undermining the U.S. public education system by diverting money away from public schools. Ravitch also claims that Charter Schools, which do not serve the diverse populations that traditional public schools do, undermine public schools due to provisions in NCLB (Ravitch, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, only about 3% of the nation's school age children opt to use funds made available by school choice. In the meantime, the other 97% of school age children attend public schools (Ravitch, 2010), and with public education being the great equalizer in American Society, careful consideration should be given to both the benefits of school choice as well as the consequences to traditional public schools. New teachers need to be

aware of the many interests influencing the field of education in the post NCLB landscape. In this post-industrial, market driven society, public education is one of the few remaining strongholds promoting a common good, and educators need to guard against a “reformed educational system advocated by privileged interests” (Stewart, 2012, p. 5). Public education, aimed at giving all students an equal shot at success, is antithesis to market driven education, which seeks to benefit the privileged few. The crucial question here, between charter or traditional public education is who is being served?

As members of a democratic society, we have a right to question those policies and applications, which offend our own conscience. Consequently, upon consideration of how the theory of NCLB holds up in actual practice, debate arises. Although controversial, it is up to educators in the nation to question the inequities in the system and to change the narrative regarding U.S. public schools. Whether through charter or traditional education, only through collaborative efforts to protect the common good, can concerned stakeholders ensure that students, above all other interests, are being served first.

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